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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000259

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SUBJECT: DASD SCHER ADDRESSES ASEAN CENTRALITY, U.S. ROLE
IN THE REGION, AND THE FUTURE OF U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE
WITH THAI COUNTERPARTS

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. During a January 21-23 visit, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia Robert Scher met with officials from the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to discuss a variety of bilateral and regional issues. The centrality of ASEAN in the region and the importance of U.S. involvement in this and other regional institutions were emphasized by both ministries. While Director of Plans and Policy at the Office of the Permanent Secretary of MOD General Vibbhavat Rajatanun provided a positive perspective on expanded military exercises with China and assured Scher the U.S. had nothing to worry about, MFA Director General of the Department of American and South Pacific Affairs Chirachai Punkrasin spoke candidly about China's increased engagement in the region, referring to China's approach to the region as "less accommodating" than in the past.

¶2. (C) MOD's Vibbhavat expressed disappointment in recent decreased IMET and FMF funding for Thailand and noted that these cuts could diminish the historically close ties between the U.S. and Thai militaries. In both meetings, Scher commended Thailand for serving as a strong ally to the U.S. and offered ideas on how the U.S. and Thailand could continue to build on their relationship, such as through possible U.S. participation in ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meetings (ADMM) Plus and bilateral mil-mil strategic talks. END SUMMARY.

THAILAND CONVINCED ASEAN CENTRALITY IN REGION MUST ENDURE

¶3. (C) During meetings at the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Scher asked Thai officials about their impressions of emerging regional institutions and, more specifically, ASEAN's role within this shifting paradigm. MFA's Chirachai expressed a general satisfaction with the current architecture of the region and an openness to its continuing evolution. He did admit that some of the emerging institutions, such as the East Asian Summit (EAS), run the risk of testing ASEAN's centrality or overlapping, for example, proposals from Japan and Australia for an East Asian Community and an Asia Pacific Community.

¶4. (C) Both Chirachai and MOD's Vibbhavat believe ASEAN should maintain its centrality in the region, as it provides a comfortable forum for interaction among ASEAN nations and with key partners such as the U.S. Chirachai indicated that the RTG wanted to enhance further ASEAN's role

in the region and had organized a taskforce to explore how Thailand might take a lead role in doing this.

THAILAND EMBRACES U.S. PLAN TO ENHANCE ROLE IN REGION

15. Chirachai and Vibbhavat viewed U.S. interest in increasing engagement in the region through ASEAN - as well as ARF, EAS, and the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) - as beneficial both in terms of regional security and in terms of economics, and stated their belief that all ASEAN nations agree with this sentiment. When DASD Scher asked Chirachai for thoughts on how might the U.S. engage more effectively in the region, the DG recommended specifically that the U.S. consider exploring issues of infrastructure and software connectivity within the region.

16. (C) The prospect of including the U.S. in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) was discussed in detail in both meetings. Vibbhavat noted that the U.S.'s positive influence on regional security made it imperative that the U.S. be one of the plus countries involved, but also stressed the importance of Secretary of Defense Gates' direct participation in these discussions. MOD expects that the RTG's ASEAN representatives would push for the ADMM Plus 8 scenario that would include the U.S. and Russia, as well as the 6 partners included in EAS, during the ADMM meeting in Hanoi this May. The RTG also intended to encourage that the focus of this dialogue be practical in nature and, thus, complement the more strategic-focused ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) rather than overlap with it.

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17. (C) Vibbhavat cautioned that the Plus 8 scenario was not certain to be adopted, as various ASEAN nations were concerned about some of the potential members. For example, Burma was disturbed by Japan's potential membership following Tokyo's recent criticism of the GOB's treatment of ASSK. In addition, Vietnam was hesitant in including India. Scher encouraged the RTG to think carefully about membership in the ADMM Plus before the planned first meeting in October, as adding additional members afterward could be complicated.

18. (C) Chirachai presented a less optimistic impression on a possible expansive ADMM Plus makeup, noting that there was currently no consensus at the MFA - or among ASEAN nations for that matter - on what countries should be invited to join. Scher expressed U.S. interest at the prospect of possibly joining the ADMM Plus meeting in October, recognizing it as a good forum for further dialogue on defense and security issues outside the ARF context. However, he also pointed out that the Department of Defense views the annual Shangri La dialogue in Singapore as the centerpiece of U.S. high-level engagement in the region on security issues.

...AND EXAMINE CHINA'S EMERGING PRESENCE AS WELL

19. (C) Scher asked both Vibbhavat and Chirachai to share their thoughts on China's growing presence in the region. MFA's Chirachai stated that China's influence in the region had increased over the past few years and that this had resulted in changes in how the PRC engaged the region. Chinese policies had become "more assertive," and their approach was now "less accommodating" than before. However, Beijing's increased engagement in Thailand was on the balance productive and not surprising considering China's proximity to Thailand.

110. (C) Regarding the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) plan's to continue small-scale military exercises with the PRC, including initiation of a marine and naval exercise in 2010, Scher asked that Thailand keep us well informed

regarding the exercises, given our longstanding relationship.

Vibbhavat stated that the RTG could not ignore the growing role of China in the region but expressed his agreement that RTARF should share details of these exercises with the U.S.

¶11. (C) Scher described the recent increase in engagement between the U.S. and the PRC, characterizing the Obama Administration's collaborative approach as a more positive way to address global problems. He expressed hope that the two nations could continue to find shared interests, particularly militarily and economically, that would help sustain the relationship even when we did not see eye to eye on political issues. He also assured the RTG that the U.S. did not want to stand in the way of China emerging as a global power, but wanted to ensure that this growing Chinese power occurred within the confines of accepted international rules and norms, and in a way that added value to the region.

THAILAND SEEKS INCREASE IN U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

¶12. (C) Both Chirachai and Vibbhavat told Scher that the RTG would like to see increased U.S. military assistance - through both the International Military Education & Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programs. Vibbhavat noted that IMET funding levels were significantly less than previous years, with a current budget of \$1.5 million compared to the \$2.4 million just a few years earlier. The training provided by IMET enhanced the knowledge and capacity of RTARF personnel and the funding cuts had taken a toll on the Thai military. With increased IMET funding, the RTARF would be able to more positively impact regional security, and would continue close U.S.-Thai military relations. Scher acknowledged a worldwide decrease in U.S. military assistance funds, and

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stated that he would work with the Department of State to try to increase funding for IMET and FMF to Thailand as early as 2012.

¶13. (C) Scher, while addressing RTG interest in receiving excess defense articles (EDA) from Iraq, explained that equipment would not be available earlier than 2014 and even then the items might not be in an acceptable condition due to extensive use, but that he would support Thailand's request for any EDA items available. Stating that the U.S. viewed military cooperation with Thailand as important, Scher encouraged MOD to explore other U.S. opportunities as well, such as APCSS courses and Counter Terrorism Fellowship funding, as well as other avenues that would provide mutual benefit.

¶14. (C) Recognizing the importance of the RTARF expanding its role outside of Southeast Asia, Scher confirmed that the USG still hoped to identify funding to assist Thai military procurement of body armor and recovery vehicles for use by Thai peacekeepers scheduled to be deployed to Sudan in July (Note: Such funding subsequently was identified the following week). Vibbhavat told DASD Scher that the RTG was exploring other ways to participate in international peacekeeping efforts. As such, deployments to Lebanon and Haiti were being considered. Chirachai expressed RTG interest in pursuing increased weapons procurement with the U.S., and noted that a committee was being formed to follow up on these proposals.

GOAL OF STRATEGIC 'DEFENSE TALKS' EXPLORED

¶15. (C) Scher shared EAP A/S Campbell and ASD Gregson's intentions to come to Thailand for a U.S.-Thai Strategic Dialogue in the coming months, and their hopes to establish a separate defense officials' dialogue. DASD Scher, Chirachai, and Vibbhavat discussed potential topics for a

mil-mil dialogue, including U.S. access to Thai training facilities, prepositioning of humanitarian relief supplies, regional security concerns, combating transnational crime, and China and India's roles in the region. Vibbhavat expressed his desire to see this dialogue be strategic in nature, and conducted at the ministerial level to ensure it has the greatest potential for successful cooperation. Chirachai noted MFA's support of this dialogue and expressed Foreign Minister Kasit's interest in participating as well.

THAI PROMISE FOLLOW-UP WITH LAOS ON THE HMONG

¶16. (C) During his meeting with Vibbhavat, Scher stressed the importance of the RTG's continued dialogue with the GOL on Hmong who had been returned to Laos in December to ensure that the Lao fulfill promises on the treatment of the Hmong and in regard to U.S. access. Scher predicted that Congress would likely react negatively towards the RTG if the Hmong were treated poorly. Vibbhavat expressed confidence that the GOL would ensure the safety of the repatriated Hmong and assured DASD Scher that the RTG would continue to monitor the situation closely.

THAILAND HOPES TO DO MORE FOR HAITI

¶17. (C) Chirichai commended the U.S. for the response to the earthquake in Haiti, and expressed the RTG's desire to play a part in long-term relief efforts. While the RTG has already sent \$100,000 to Haiti through Mexico, Thailand also planned to send medical teams and supplies to Haiti in the future. Chirachai stressed that the RTG would likely seek assistance from the UN and the U.S. to provide this aid.

¶18. (SBU) DASD Scher cleared this cable.
JOHN